

PART 1


Gather Information and Strategize

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Learn How Grassroots Advocacy Works

In this chapter, you will learn:

- How grassroots advocacy works
- Why voting is not enough to win on your issues
- Why where you live determines your political strategy
- Eight important grassroots concepts
- What “staying on message” means and why it is imperative

ur government is extraordinarily fragmented for reasons that you probably cherish. Putting lots of people from lots of different districts in charge of our government seems to have been an effective way to guard against too much power being concentrated in the hands of any one individual.

Our government has ingeniously avoided this problem for a couple of hundred years by fracturing power into an almost indefensible number of little pieces. We may have a president of the United States, but the president must rely on Congress to pass laws. And what does the Congress consist of? A couple of close confidants? No. A committee of ten expert advisers? No. A couple dozen of the richest or smartest people in the land? No. The Congress currently consists of 535 publicly elected officials who, more or

less like the president, feel that they are to some extent in charge of the governance of our country. The Congress is divided into two chambers: the House of Representatives (435) and the Senate (100). The executive and legislative branches of our federal government are in turn kept in check by the Supreme Court, yet another body with an assortment of powers.

And that's just the federal government. You probably have a state government that is organized in a similar, highly fragmented fashion. Then there's a local or city government that also governs you. If it sounds hopelessly convoluted, you are beginning to get the idea.

Our country has the sort of organizational chart that would mar any CEO's sleep with fitful starts, yet your freedoms depend on this arrangement. The inherent confusion of the American system of government helps deter our elected officials from the evil expressions of power that a more efficient system of government would facilitate.

All of these little pieces of power are divided up into legislative districts according to geography, and the registered voters who live in each district generally get to elect their representatives. This seems a fair way to divide influence, but it has another benefit. So many people from so many different places get elected to run our country that a broad number of stakeholders—not just people from different political parties—but people from far-flung places with different economies, different experiences, different lives—are potentially involved in the governance of our country. In addition to their own differences being brought to bear on the questions of the day, our representatives risk losing their power on Election Day if they do not satisfactorily reflect the needs, goals, and ideas of the different groups that live within the different districts they represent.

In practice, the structure of our government results in a number of frustrations. First, the need for compromise is beyond question in U.S. politics because there are too many stakeholders affected by any proposed law to keep it pure. Another drawback is that resolving the various conflicts created by a multitude of interested parties can make the actual process of crafting legislation convoluted and time-consuming. You probably already knew that. Some lament this, but a government characterized by the unan-

Illustration 1.1. The Federal Legislative Process and the Role of Constituents

Constituents play a critical role in the legislative process by acting as a conduit of information between elected officials and their home districts.

Things That Influence Lawmakers:

- Campaign Contributions
- Political Parties
- Other Lawmakers
- The News Media
- Scholars and Researchers
- Their Life Experiences
- Institutional Support (e.g., the Congressional Budget Office and the General Accounting Office)
- Personal Staff
- Community-based Advocates
- Re-election Campaign Strategy

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- Statistics from the district
 - Real-life examples
 - Issue expertise
 - Access to district voters
 - News media opportunities



imous embrace of extraordinarily simple solutions to public problems is called a dictatorship, and you do not want that.

If passing legislation in this country were quick and straightforward, ice cream would have been outlawed long ago—and there would be even more serious curbing of our freedoms. I can't think of any just now, but that ice cream report was pretty scary.

In the end, the structure protects us, but it does not guarantee that the actual governance will be high quality. Our government merely offers promise. Actual governance is left up to those in power and those who choose to participate in the process (see Illustration 1.1).

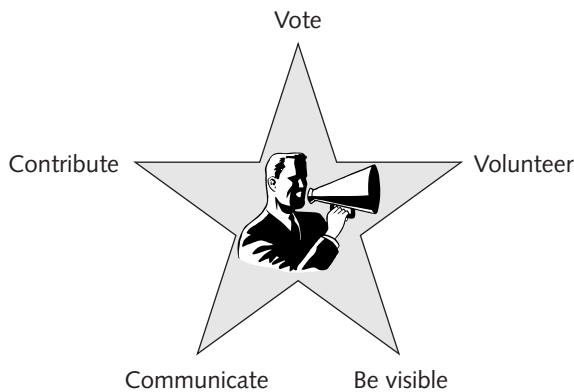
THE GRASSROOTS STAR OF INFLUENCE

There are five main reasons that an elected official would want to do your bidding: voting, contributing, volunteering, visibility, and communication. These five characteristics form the grassroots star of influence (see Illustration 1.2).

- **Voting.** This is the most important and most basic of the reasons that an elected official would want to pay attention to you. In most cases, being a constituent obviates the need for a lengthy or technical discussion or debate related to your issues. It is not that your legislators are not interested in the substantive provisions in any piece of legislation, but they usually have staff who can help them understand what a bill might do. What your legislator does not know is if any particular piece of legislation is a priority to her voters—a priority for passage and a priority for the limited amount of funding that the government can provide. If you say a bill is a priority and you are a voter, then it becomes a priority. No amount of campaign funding can supplant the power you have as a voter to help determine the legislative priorities for your district. (See Part Three.)

- **Contributing.** In addition to votes, it takes a lot of money for elected officials to run for office and then to run for reelection, and there is no indi-

Illustration 1.2. The Grassroots Star of Influence



cation that things are going to change anytime soon. This means that elected officials must constantly be chasing campaign contributions—and the easiest way for them to do that is by keeping the people who have already given them money happy. If you are a campaign contributor, you are important to your elected officials. (See Part Three.)

- **Volunteering.** A third way to get the ear of a current or potential legislator is to volunteer for a candidate's campaign. Labor is very expensive, and most electoral campaigns are starved for cash. That means that people who volunteer often become part of a close, extremely valued circle of supporters who do the heavy day-to-day lifting of putting (or keeping) a candidate in office. Volunteers are seldom forgotten. (See Part Five.)

- **Visibility.** Elected officials are sometimes attracted to people with high visibility. People who are highly visible often represent or influence their own constituency of voters and contributors as opinion leaders in their communities. If the president of the local university, for example, is vocal in her support of the governor, that support might generate a large number of votes for the governor. The governor would do well to learn the issues and positions that are important to the president of the university. (See Part Four.)

- **Communication.** If you are a voter, a campaign contributor, a volunteer, or a community leader, then your elected officials want to make you happy, but they cannot read your mind. They depend on you to communicate your general areas of interest on the campaign trail and to substantively inform them about specific legislation when they are in office. Many people assume that legislators are interested in counting letters or phone calls related to an issue and



One-Hour Rule

Grassroots success relies on three things: where you live, how you communicate, and if people in other districts are asking for the same thing.

do not really care to delve into individual stories or arguments. This is not true. Elected officials need anecdotal, local stories to make the statistics related to a particular initiative come alive. Local arguments and stories are both welcome, even sought after, by elected officials. Such communications form the backbone of high-quality grassroots actions as opposed to low-quality actions (like preprinted postcards and petitions) that focus being counted in a legislative office without attempting to establish a substantive exchange with your lawmakers.

WELCOME TO THE GRASSROOTS DRIVE-IN

Cultivating an ongoing relationship with your elected officials is the best way to serve the issues you care about over the long term, but your efforts alone do not determine grassroots success. Ultimately, your efforts must be mirrored by advocates across a large number of districts in order to have a federal, state, or local government pass the bills you care about.

This is how it works. Picture your larger struggle for success as a trip to the Grassroots Drive-In, where the feature film is *The Grassroots Success Story*.

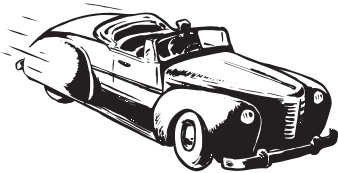
You want as many elected officials as possible to see this movie, and you have a little two-seater convertible. But you've got only one extra seat in your convertible, so you can invite one and only one lawmaker to come to the drive-in with you. No matter how hard you try (and don't even think about the trunk), you can bring one and only one representative in with you. Once inside the drive-in, your lovely convertible will take up one and only one parking space. (This scenario is sketched out in Illustration 1.3.)

The problem is that *The Grassroots Success Story* will not be shown until at least half of the parking spots are filled. You take up only one spot in the parking lot. How do you get the other available parking spots filled with legislators? Other people with other two-seater convertibles have to convince their legislators to come to the drive-in in their cars until enough of the parking spots are filled.

The reason you have a two-seater convertible is that for almost every legislative battle, you will have one and only one elected official who represents

Illustration 1.3. Welcome to the Grassroots Drive-In

You have a two-seater convertible and a ticket to the Grassroots Drive-in.



You must convince your own representative to see the show with you.



The movie will not start until at least half of the parking spots are full. You must work in concert with constituents from other districts to get lawmakers to the drive-in (and move your issue forward).



your interests. (You have two legislators in the U.S. Senate, but let's keep it simple for now.) No matter how hard you try, it is almost impossible to make any elected official other than the one who officially represents you care about your requests. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage. The advantage is that you are the key to bringing your elected official to the Grassroots Drive-In. No one who lives outside the district will be more persuasive than you. The disadvantage is that you must rely on advocates from other districts to convince their own legislators to vote your way.

Each parking space at the drive-in stands for a single district represented by an individual legislator. More than half of the spaces need to be filled for the movie to begin because a majority vote at any level of government is generally required to advance legislation. Efforts must be coordinated for the grassroots to have a real impact on the fate of a particular piece of legislation.

It is important to understand that each convertible does not represent a single letter, or phone call, or e-mail. What if you are fighting for an issue that generates 100,000 letters? If those 100,000 are all from people living in the same district, then they are all sharing one little convertible. Their 100,000 letters might very well bring only one representative to the drive-in—and the movie will not be screened. If, however, those 100,000 letters are from 250 different districts, and if those letters are sufficiently compelling, then you might get 250 legislators to the movie; the trailers will roll and you can treat your lawmakers to popcorn.

Note that it does not necessarily take more than one person to cultivate a representative's vote on a given issue. It is the rare issue that generates bags of mail in a legislative office, and one compelling local story can secure the support of your federal or state lawmakers, but you must engage in high-quality grassroots actions to have this sort of impact. You must provide local, individual information when you communicate for your elected officials. If you send cookie-cutter letters and e-mail to a legislative office that are not personalized in any way, they will simply be counted. Such low-quality grassroots actions require many more advocates to secure a lawmaker's support.

A high-quality grassroots advocate can influence her legislators, but that is not enough to secure a victory in Congress or the state legislature. The

only way we can exert some influence on the entire system is by coordinating our efforts with others from other districts. Advocates for any issue must be heard from the broadest possible geographical region, but each advocate needs to concentrate on his or her own representatives, preferably with the high-quality grassroots actions outlined in this book.

EIGHT IMPORTANT GRASSROOTS CONCEPTS

Here are some additional concepts for you to keep in mind when you get started as an advocate.

1: Voting Is Not Enough

The devil is in the details, and once you have elected a candidate to office, that person will have to deal with those details as they relate to the issues you care about. When candidates are campaigning, they tend to advertise their issue



Advice from the Field

The Honorable Jesse Jackson Jr.

Member

U.S. House of Representatives (Illinois, Second District)

“Advocates need to commit to a system of belief. You want to set a fixed star that is nearly unobtainable. This will steer you through any particular bill in Congress, through any setbacks; you won’t burn out; you won’t be tempted to turn on others who are fighting for the same cause. Your advocacy will be sustainable over the long run.”

positions in broad strokes. They are for the right to abortion or against it. They are for gun control or against it. They are for gay and lesbian rights or against them. Legislation, however, is specific, and the legislation that is introduced in any given legislative session will address your issues in a specific way. Along the way there will be trade-offs, amendments, deals—that is, politics. If you abandon your issue after Election Day, anything might happen.

2: Geography Is the Single Most Important Thing About You and Your Issues

It does not matter if you have figured out how to send an e-mail to every member of Congress. It does not matter if you have honed a razor-sharp set of arguments that you believe will compel even the most intractable of elected officials to come around to your way of thinking. The single most important thing about you when you initiate communication with an elected official is not who you are, or what your job title is, or how well you can argue. It is where you live. Period. If you live in the district, your elected officials want to make you happy. If you don't live in the district but you've got a great argument, they probably do not care. In the political arena, a district mailing address trumps a strong argument from a nonconstituent every time.

In my job, I set up a lot of meetings between elected officials and constituents. It is not uncommon for someone to come to Washington, D.C., believing that he should be able to see anyone he wants—as if everyone represents him. Usually he also believes that what elected officials crave are thick folders brimming with lots of good information. Neither of these beliefs is true. The only information an elected official is generally looking for is that an actual voter supports a specific bill. There is no need for extensive argument or debate. Officials crave votes, and if you cannot deliver a vote, any fantastic arguments you may have suddenly pale. A debate with a constituent from a different district usually annoys rather than enlightens.

3: One Angry Letter Does Not Change the World

There is an assumption among some advocates that their elected officials are slightly dim, morally compromised, and in need of scolding into doing

the right thing. Whether on paper or in person, these advocates generally start out loud and angry, and they end with an abrupt list of demands. This is not the way to win friends and influence people.

Equally unfortunate is an expectation that one indignant e-mail should bring the whole of the U.S. Congress to a grinding halt. As a rule, U.S. senators are harder to scare than that.

Yes, I hope you find your voice, and I hope you use it. But remember that you are one of hundreds of thousands of citizens in any legislative district with a lot of occupations, outlooks, and concerns. There are a lot of people with legitimate viewpoints that are different from yours. In this book, I will do my best to give you the tools and the confidence you need to interact with your elected officials in a powerful and persuasive way—but a little humility is appropriate.

At the same time, you should not feel that if your letter does not convince everyone in Congress to vote your way that you are a failure. You may convince your particular representative to appreciate your views on a specific issue, but he or she is but one of many. Remember the Grassroots Drive-In: for the grassroots to win, many people who care about the same things you do but live in different legislative districts must communicate with their representatives. You play an important role in that process because you have the opportunity to compel your representative's vote with compelling local stories and arguments.

Your job, however, is necessarily limited to your specific representatives—not your entire state legislature, the entire Congress, or the world.

4: Instant Grassroots (Like Signing On-Line Petitions) Is Not Especially Effective

Elected officials are perfectly aware that the postcard you signed at the grocery store took all of about ten seconds of your time. They know that you don't really understand the issue. They might suspect that even though you signed the postcard, you don't really care. Elected officials try their hardest to insist that they respond to every piece of communication in their office the same way, but the fact is that most are aware of just how much

effort each piece of communication takes the sender. Ridiculously simple grassroots methods are discounted accordingly. But letters that are personalized with stories and statistics from the district generally have more of an impact than constituents assume.

5: Money Is Part of the Game

The one exception to geography that elected officials are likely to grant is to campaign contributors—those people who donate money to their political campaigns. You may not like the fact that money plays a role in American politics, but it is part of the game. If you refuse to take out your checkbook the same way you write letters or vote, you should know that you are taking an effective weapon out of your arsenal, especially because modest donations can and do get the attention of elected officials. You can, of course, choose to wage your battle on other fronts—that is your choice—but that choice just might abandon a powerful tool to your opposition.

Sometimes advocates feel that they cannot possibly compete with the amounts of money thrown around by big business interests and so decide not to contribute to political campaigns. This is a shame because even a modest campaign contribution is likely to get the attention of your elected officials. (See Action 13.)

6: Elected Officials Are Real People—With All of the Complexity and Imperfection That Implies

Because so many people are involved in the job of governance in our country, Americans are always guaranteed that there is a wide range of personality types in office. The only way you can discover if you are represented ably is to write, call, or meet with your elected officials once in a while. It's the political equivalent of looking under the bed.

When you begin fighting for your issues, make sure you focus on the actual individuals who are elected to represent you—and really try to understand them. Your understanding of the legislative process, parliamentary procedure, and legislative maneuvers is of secondary importance

to your understanding of the individual personalities that belong to your actual representatives.

7: One Successful Grassroots Campaign Will Not Settle Your Issues Once and for All

The second you were able to secure an equal high-quality education for every American child, some group would explode in angry opposition based on the most tenuous research that chalk dust in public schools was dangerous to children and that the entire system had to be dismantled.

But before the system could be dismantled, another group of people would want to divert the funding because the quality education would seem to be costing too much, meaning that it was costing *something*. Let's face it: the chalk alone to supply every classroom, to educate every kid in the country, would look like a shocking figure when it was all added up.

And other groups would spring up, with other complaints, other ambitions, other agendas, other uses for the funding. So settle in and get comfortable. The fights over the issues that you care about are going to be ongoing, long-term battles that precede your involvement and continue long after you have burned out emotionally, intellectually, or physically. Health care will always be an issue. Education will always be an issue. Civil rights will always be an issue. Terrorism and "homeland security" will now always be an issue.

8: "Staying on Message" Is the Ultimate Law of Grassroots Activism

Staying on message is serious business to grassroots organizers. Although every advocate has his or her own story, own experiences, own personal voice on the issues of the day, the grassroots will only be as effective as it is able to have everyone who cares about a given issue make the *same exact request*—no matter how individualized their justification for that request is.

You can work alone, identify your own issues, write your own letters. Your issues will benefit in some small way from your participation. But if you want your government to respond, you should consider working in

conjunction with others who care about the same issues that you do. In most cases, this coordination is achieved through a grassroots network run by an interest group. (See Action 4 to find out how to join an existing grassroots network that fights for the issues you care about.)

In either case, it takes a lot of people, from a lot of different places, making the same request, to seize the attention of our elected officials on a single, specific issue. For real change, this process of coordinating a broad coalition of advocates to share their personal stories and local arguments while making the same request must be repeated over and over again at every level of government. Only then will a sufficient amount of legislation be enacted to effectively address a given issue.